



File Code: 1950/2470

Date: February 22, 2006

Dear Interested Party,

The Livingston Ranger District of the Gallatin National Forest is currently seeking public comments on an upcoming analysis of the proposed **Smith Creek Vegetation Treatment Project**. The analysis area is located in the Crazy Mountains along the northwest corner of the Livingston Ranger District, approximately 35 miles north of Livingston, Montana. The Smith Creek analysis area is bordered on the west and south by the National Forest boundary, and by the Lewis & Clark National Forest to the north and east. The approximately 16,900 acre analysis area is primarily National Forest System lands, but also includes interspersed private lands. (See attached Vicinity and Activity Area Maps).

The Smith/Shields Watershed Risk Assessment, which was completed in May of 2005, identified high natural fuel levels in the wildland-urban interface (WUI) area. Because of these fuel levels, a wildfire would result in unsafe conditions for the public and firefighters safety. Other risks to resources include continuous reductions in forage production for wildlife and livestock from increasing canopy closures of forested stands; low levels of aspen regeneration and reduction in areas containing aspen; increasingly lower levels of shrub/grass cover types from conifer encroachment (shrinking meadows); and susceptibility of forested stands to high levels of bark beetle attacks.

The analysis will be conducted in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), and will be designed to inform the responsible official of the potential environmental consequences of potential activities associated with the proposal.

Background – Fire and Fuels

B. John Losensky completed a fire history study in 1993 that focused on the west slope of the Crazy Mountains on the Livingston Ranger District. Losensky reached conclusions that wildfires in most or all of the Crazy Mountains were not uncommon. Data suggests that major portions were impacted by fire in 1849, 1855 and 1863, which was the last major fire. Many of these fires probably began in the valley grasslands and moved upslope into the forested lands.

Recent human activity has influenced the historic role fire has played on this Crazy Mountain landscape. The grasslands are irrigated, farmed, and grazed and some of the timbered areas have been logged. In addition, fire suppression has been very successful in this area. Fires, which historically would have grown to large sizes, have been suppressed shortly after ignition. Recent fires in or near the analysis area include the 1994 Smith Creek fire, which burnt 1,000 acres and the 2000 Sugarloaf fire, which burnt 400 acres, and the 2003 Slippery Rock fire, which burnt 1,072 acres.

Numerous private residences are located within the analysis area, many of which are located along the Smith Creek Road #991. The communities at risk are located in Sections 5, 6, and 7 of



T.5N., R.10E., WM. The largest concentration of residences (approximately 20), within the forest boundary, is the Smith Creek subdivision. These residences are a combination of summer cabins and year round residences. The Smith Creek subdivision has been identified as a community at risk from wildfire by the recently completed Smith/Shields Risk Assessment. The reasons for the high fire risk rating include poor access and heavy fuel loadings, both along the travel route and in the subdivision. Park County is currently developing their Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP), which should be completed by early summer. The Smith Creek area has been identified in the preliminary draft CWPP as a WUI at risk from wildfires.

A wide variety of land management practices have occurred within the analysis area. Some private lands have been logged or grazed; while other landowners have adopted a passive approach. National Forest System lands contain several roads, dispersed recreation areas and trailheads, suitable timber areas, and grazing allotments. This all leads to a very diverse landscape, resulting in a complex fire management area.

Purpose and Need

The purpose and need for this integrated vegetation treatment project include:

- To begin modifying potential fire behavior by creating vegetation and fuel conditions that provide for firefighter and public safety in the event of a wildland fire.
- To improve wildlife habitat and available forage for wildlife and livestock by modifying forest structure, maintaining meadow and aspen areas and opening densely forested conditions.
- To modify residual tree stand conditions so they are less susceptible to future insect and disease infestations.

Proposed Action

Given the combination of factors stated above, we feel that action is needed. Our preliminary proposal is to treat vegetation in an approximately 8,000 acre project area (including the WUI area, i.e., 1½ mile out from interface between private and NFS lands as defined in the Healthy Forests Restoration Act of 2003), of the 16,000 acre analysis area (see attached Activity Area Map).

Vegetation treatments that reduce fuels are a primary focus of the project, especially around the wildland-urban interface (WUI), but treatments may also include other adjacent areas in the analysis area to meet fuels and other resource objectives.

The project will be consistent with the management direction of the GNF Forest Plan (1987) as amended.

The proposed treatments may include:

- Thinning overstory and understory conifer tree stands.
- Patch cuts (removal of trees from areas ranging between 1- 10 acres)
- Harvesting of insect or disease damaged/dead conifers trees.
- Slashing and/or harvesting conifers encroaching into meadows and aspen stands.
- Prescribed burning meadow type areas and underburning in treated forested stands.
- Piling and removing or burning downed woody materials and fuels resulting from treatment actions.

To implement these activities, tractor, cable, skyline or helicopter logging methods may be needed. In addition, personal use and commercial post and pole activities may be necessary.

Public Involvement

The first step in environmental analysis is to determine what needs to be analyzed. To do this, the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) outlines a process termed "scoping" (refer to 40 CFR 1501.7). The Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) defines scoping as "an early and open process for determining the scope of issues to be addressed and for identifying the significant issues related to a Proposed Action" (40 CFR 1501.7).

First, comments are obtained from interested and affected parties, both within and outside the agency, to develop potential issues that must be considered. Second, the "potential issues" are reviewed by the interdisciplinary team to determine: (a) the key issues to be analyzed in depth and (b) issues that are not significant or that have been covered by prior environmental review and, therefore, should be eliminated from detailed study. After scoping is complete, documentation of the review of comments and potential issues will be compiled and will be located in the project file.

Your comments relative to the purpose and need and proposed action, project scope and possible impacts are critical, e.g., what do you like or dislike about what is being proposed? What are some possible improvements/changes to make the proposal better? What are some of your concerns or opportunities relative to the project area and proposal?

For the Smith Creek Fuels Reduction Project, the scoping process is only one aspect of our public involvement process. This letter is being mailed to individuals or groups who have indicated an interest in similar projects on the Gallatin National Forest, or live in the vicinity of the project area. The goal of public involvement is to collaborate with interested individuals, agencies, and groups.

We plan on organizing public field trips and meetings, but would like to know what types of public involvement you think are needed to foster a collaborative planning process.

Our East-Zone Fire Organization and Conservation Education Technician will develop a public involvement plan utilizing your comments.

Some important partners in this project include private landowners, stakeholders and interest groups, watershed groups/councils, Park and Meagher Counties, Northern Rocky Mountain Resource Conservation and Development, and the Department of National Resources and Conservation. The Forest Service will collaborate with the agencies, interested parties and individuals, as the Counties develop their Community Wildfire Plans applicable to the project area.

Preliminary Issues

A preliminary list of issues includes but is not limited to:

- Sediment concerns in Smith Creek and East Fork of Smith Creek and potential effects to Yellowstone cutthroat trout.
- Possible health and aesthetics effects to local landowners and the general public from smoke associated with prescribed burning.
- Noxious weed spread and loss of native vegetative species.
- Coordination with the livestock operations associated with the Upper Shields Range Allotments (Smith Creek, Three Peaks, Meadow Creek).
- Cumulative effects from past harvesting.

Your comments will help confirm if these are significant issues as well as help to identify other issues that should be addressed.

Opportunities

Opportunities identified to date, include, but are not limited to:

- Increased collaboration and communication with local, county, and state agencies, groups, and individuals to integrate private and National Forest fuels reduction.
- Increase large woody debris and improve fish passageways and connectivity in identified stream reaches to improve habitat and structure for native cutthroat trout.
- Improve conditions of degraded road segments to help reduce sediment concerns in Smith Creek
- Include post & pole areas to provide a local source for commercial and/or personal use while reducing stand densities.

In Closing

Your comments will be used in our environmental analysis to help: (1) refine the purpose and need, (2) determine the scope of the issues to be addressed; (3) determine the significant issues relating to the proposed action; (4) assist in the development of the proposed action, (5) identify opportunities, and (5) to aide in development of a public involvement plan.

I am asking you to review the proposal and submit any comments or concerns you may have about this project on the enclosed comment sheet. Please submit your written comments to Steve

Schacht, ID Team Leader, Big Timber Ranger District, P.O. Box 1130, Big Timber, MT 59011. You can also email comments to sschacht@fs.fed.us. **Comments need to be submitted by March 24, 2006.**

For more information, please contact myself (406)-222-1892, or Steve Schacht, ID Team Leader (406)-932-5155.

Thank you for your interest and participation.

Sincerely,

/s/ Ron J. Archuleta

RON J. ARCHULETA
District Ranger
Livingston Ranger District

Attachment: Vicinity and Activity Area Maps and Comment Sheet

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Smith Creek Vegetation Treatment Project (page 1 of 2)
Comment Sheet on Proposals – Please Return by March 24, 2006

Your name_____

Your address_____

Do you have comments that can help refine the purpose and need?

Are there additional issues, concerns and/or opportunities specific to the proposed action?

Smith Creek Vegetation Treatment Project (page 2 of 2)

Comment Sheet on Proposals – Please Return by March 24, 2006

Are there specific public involvement activities you think should be included in our public involvement plan?

Other comments on the Proposal:

Would you like to receive further correspondence for this project?

YES _____

NO _____